

# They shoot badgers, don't they?

I have said this before and I return to it again as the extension to both pilot culls in England has been granted: the badger cull is wrong.

While it is indisputable that badgers can pass bovine tuberculosis (bTB) to cattle, decades of extensive scientific research costing tens of millions of pounds has tested the efficacy of culling badgers and concluded that culling is not a viable option. In fact, it could actually make things worse. Despite the scientific recommendations, the cull was given the go-ahead.

Albert Einstein defined insanity as doing the same thing over and over again and expecting different results. Is the British government mad? I doubt it, but I think they are under pressure to at least look like they're doing something about the problem, even if that goes against the very scientific advice they commissioned and the taxpayer funded.

There's no doubting that bTB causes havoc on farms with precious cattle stocks. Since 2008, over 200,000 cattle have been slaughtered due to bTB, so I can totally understand why cattle farmers are up in arms. However, in lobbying the government to take up arms for a cull, the National Farmers Union has made the badger a scapegoat (if you'll excuse the metaphor). Also, a cull has to remove 70% of badgers in an area in order to effect a 16% reduction in cattle infection. Now, 16% isn't very much, but even if it was, badger populations are notoriously hard to count, making it extremely difficult to arrive at a precise figure behind that 70%. Evidently, the ongoing culls have hit this exact problem as the latest estimate for the pilot populations has halved since the original assessment.

Environment Secretary Owen Paterson's recent comment that, "Badgers have moved the goalposts", whilst laugh-out-loud funny in its own foot-in-mouth silliness, exemplifies the difficulty in counting these secretive creatures. Badgers live underground in extensive setts and usually emerge only at night. Even though the UK has the highest density of badgers in the world, I would bet that most people have never seen a living badger. Instead, they are more likely to witness only the sad individuals that inflate road-kill statistics.

The culling of badgers in southwest England defies science and common sense, says **Kaleel Zibe**.

After all, when the guns stop blazing, bovine tuberculosis will still be a major problem for Britain's farmers

So, hundreds of badgers continue to be shot in a trial that has been extended, against the advice of scientists, who say that a cull must be brief, otherwise the threat of dispersal increases too much. A disturbed badger population changes its behaviour to become more mobile, which risks greater contact with cattle and the potential of infecting neighbouring badger populations. Short of surrounding the trial areas with a wall that extends several metres underground, it looks like those carrying out the cull are moving their own goalposts.

It seems that the only long-term solution is to vaccinate both badgers and cattle. This isn't straightforward either, as injected vaccines are cited as difficult and costly to administer to badgers, while vaccinating cattle is technically illegal under EU law. It looks like there is hope in the form of an oral vaccine that can be left out for badgers to eat without disturbance. Surely all efforts should be put into this rather than demanding Brock's blood? Frustratingly, it looks like there is at least a six-year wait for this oral vaccine. However, right now the cost of injecting the vaccine into badgers should be seen in the context of the £100 million it costs to test cattle each year for bTB.

## Frustration & delight

On a lighter note, my own experience with badgers has been a mixture of frustration and eventual delight. It took me years to see my first living badger. I was lucky enough to be pointed to a secluded active sett on private land in Northumberland where I was allowed to set up a hide. Installing the hide a week or so in advance I also left an old fleece tied round a branch next to one of their tracks so my smell wouldn't be unfamiliar. Waiting inside the hide one evening at dusk, I heard some snuffling around the side: bustling out of an entirely different hole was my first badger! Of course, by the time I'd switched hide windows he was off down a track and disappeared into the evening gloom. Luckily, I had another brief encounter. As the light faded into near darkness I had to reduce the exposure compensation by a full stop at ISO 6400 to even get 1/25sec. At last, I saw a twitching snout emerge from the main entrance and out of the hole popped the delightful young badger you see pictured here. Fantastic! 🐾

• The badger culls in Somerset and Gloucestershire were granted extensions by Natural England because the number of badgers shot fell well short of government targets. The Somerset cull finished on November 1. The Gloucestershire cull was granted an eight-week extension that concludes on December 18.



**"Decades of extensive scientific research costing tens of millions of pounds has concluded that culling is not a viable option"**

Safe to come out: A young badger emerges from a sett at dusk in Northumberland, in northeast England

Nikon D3 with Nikkor 600mm f/4 lens, ISO 6400, 1/25sec at f/4